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## **Empowering English Language Teachers Through History**

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### **Abstract**

TESOL training programs typically offer courses in methods and pedagogy, along with other classes to equip future English language teaching (ELT) professionals with essential teaching skills and knowledge. Not as frequently offered or required, however, is a course focusing on critically examining political and philosophical aspects of ELT. This article discusses why I believe it is important for TESOL curriculums to include topics on the diachronic development and synchronic variations of the English language and to engage students in topics that would allow them to critically examine embedded power relations in ELT. By reflecting on my own classroom experience as a TESOL program director, I demonstrate how such knowledge can foster a critical perspective in ELT as well as empower students, thereby aligning ourselves with the Christian principles of bringing justice to our society and empowering God's people.

**Key words:** critical pedagogy, global Englishes, history of English, teacher training

### **Introduction**

Currently 'empowerment' is one of the most frequently adopted overarching goals in English language teaching (Lessard-Clouston, 2015). Although both secular and Christian teachers seek to empower their students to reach their full potential by developing essential linguistic skills, spiritually minded teachers would find their ultimate rewards in spiritually nurturing those who struggle along the way with Christ-like compassion and encouragement. As caring Christian teachers, they would try their best to be sensitive about the needs of the students they serve. Although they may not always openly promote Christian beliefs in the classroom, basic Christian principles such as justice, equality, and compassion will undergird each decision that dedicated Christian English teachers make in their teaching. Also, they are keenly attuned to the ethical dimensions of their profession.

However, not as frequently addressed are intrinsic needs that some of the teachers themselves may have as they grow into seasoned professionals in the field – particularly the need to develop a critical perspective on the global and local positions of English. The global spread of English has prompted much debate concerning the ethical ramifications of English language teaching (e.g., Phillipson, 1992). Various scholars have reflected on the embedded power

relations in ELT and pointed out the need for democratizing our instruction and recognizing the pluricentricity of English from a philosophical and ideological point of view (e.g., Jenkins, 2015; Kachru, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Such scholars have also challenged native speaker ideology and the notion of fixed standards. Citing Giroux's critical pedagogy, Pennycook (1994) stated that teachers should take ethics into account in their teaching career. He argued that "issues we face as teachers and students are not just questions of knowledge and truth but also of good and bad, of the need to struggle against inequality and injustice" (Pennycook, 1994, p. 298). In order for such a critical pedagogy to materialize, I believe it is vital for teachers to recognize that teaching English, now associated with enormous economic and political power, has a potential of condoning, if not promoting, linguicism and of rendering ELT a global commodity, making even the most scrupulous teachers susceptible to becoming accomplices to perpetuating such practices. In this sense it would be essential for future ELT professionals to be engaged in discussions concerning philosophical issues surrounding ELT.

These themes may be covered in varying degrees in sociolinguistics and are usually addressed in greater depth in courses such as world Englishes or English as an international language. However, core requirements of TESOL training programs typically center on methods and pedagogy, along with courses such as the structure of English, assessment, language and culture, second language acquisition, and research methods, while subject matter dealing with political and philosophical aspects of ELT is usually not included in the curriculum. In this article, I reflect on my own classroom experience as a teacher trainer, demonstrating how knowledge of the diachronic development and synchronic variations of the English language can foster a critical perspective of our teaching as well as empower future teachers, thereby aligning ourselves with the Christian principles of bringing justice to our society and empowering God's people. Data for this study come from students' responses to a general email that was sent out to TESOL graduate students who were introduced to these themes in one of their classes.<sup>1</sup> The email invited students to share a brief paragraph on how the knowledge gained through the course has prepared them for their career in teaching English to speakers of other languages.

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<sup>1</sup> Non-TESOL graduate students (e.g., students with writing or literature emphasis or from another discipline) who took the course were not included in the study, except for one student whose research centers on the issues concerning multilingual writers. Four of the participants (S1, S2, S3, S4) are U.S. born L1 English speakers, and five (S5, S6, S7, S8, S9) are L2 English speakers of foreign nationalities. Since some of the L2 speakers are expert users of English with near-native proficiency, I avoided grouping these students using the native/non-native binary. The terms NEST and NNEST, however, are used in the discussion because this binary is frequently invoked in literature on teaching English as a global language.

Students were informed that participation was strictly voluntary. All but one student returned their responses, which varied in form; some responded in the form of long letters whereas others included one or two paragraphs. One student responded in the form of a list. Data analysis involved a reiterative process of coding, categorizing, and recoding data. The initial coding process identified ten categories, based on specific outcomes mentioned by students. They were re-categorized into five final categories outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. *Final Categories of Student Responses*

Most Significant Course Outcomes	Frequencies
○ Changed perception about native language and dialect	3
○ Increased ownership of English as a NNEST	2
○ Becoming more accommodating through changes in perception about standards and correctness	6
○ Critical approach to diversity-oriented materials selection	1
○ Ability to explain irregularities of the English language	1

*Note:* A total of nine students participated in the study. The reason the total frequencies exceed nine is because some students included more than one outcome in their responses.

### **Course Themes and Structure**

The course, one of the recent offerings in the program, focused on the development of the English language, but the aim of the course was not so much to teach extensive knowledge on the rules of language development. Rather, it focused on familiarizing students with the social and political history along with pertinent linguistic examples to enhance the lessons. The course also provided an overview of various forms of nativized Englishes, as well as an introduction to the newly emerging paradigms in ELT, such as English as an international language (EIL) and English as a lingua franca (ELF). Each year changes were made in terms of topics and materials, but the core components have always included a brief survey of the development of the English language along with social and political backgrounds, which was taught in the first half of the course. The second half of the course was devoted to discussions on the global spread of English, the emergence of World Englishes, and the changing landscape of English users around the globe (see the Appendix for a partial list of course topics and materials). Students have frequently reported experiencing mind-boggling changes to their existing views and attitudes.

For example, one student commented that he had never had his views challenged to that extent. Other students reported having serious conversations with others related to the course topics outside the class. It was intriguing to hear some students talk about who was and who was not yet converted as the semester progressed, equating their experiences to that of religious conversion, as they described their emotional and intellectual journey. In the remainder of the article, I report what my students have graciously shared, outlining three different ways in which the knowledge gained in the course has impacted them.

## **Outcomes**

### **1. Learning about history encourages students to resist a prescriptive view of language and encourages them to be accommodating of varieties of English.**

The most frequently mentioned outcome (n=6, 67%) was a shift of attitude towards correctness and standards and becoming more accommodating of variations. One student wrote,

Prior to taking this course, I firmly supported the idea that Standard English was/should be the only form of English learned. I appreciated learning that English can be learned with the retention of diverse accents... My world view on English was changed and for the better. I learned that learning English wasn't about losing one's accent but rather about intelligibility. My goal is no longer accent reduction, nor the correction of overly stressed syllables. However, I focus on teaching comprehensible communication and intelligible output while taking part in academic or casual discourse. (S1)

Another student, who commented that the course was "the last nail in the coffin for prescriptivist thinking," stated that

Learning about the history of English helped me emotionally separate myself from believing that the way I say things is the correct way to say things. I have shifted from saying that there is a right way to use English to saying that there is a (geographically and culturally situated) typical way of using it. I no longer think in terms of purity either... Another possibly interesting observation is that I am letting my own idiolect drift more often. When I interact with ELLs or people with other dialects, I am more likely to adapt to them than before. I am not concerned about providing them with subpar input or creating "bad habits" for them. In other words, in light of English's history, there is no reason for me to think that it is sacred as an institution. (S2)

Yet another student commented that various themes covered in the class helped her to "develop a more informed understanding of the synchronic and diachronic developmental changes of the English language, thus excluding the notion of pure, hermetically sealed version of a language" (S5). She further noted that gaining a historical perspective helped her "address the unfounded

prejudice about one national variety of English being superior over another either aesthetically or intrinsically” (S5).

Using sociolinguistic perspectives as a broad framework, the course also incorporated various voices of postcolonial writers such as Chinua Achebe (1965) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986). Although some of these authors represent opposing views about the position of English as an official means of communication, reflecting on conflicting ideologies has allowed students to peruse ethical responsibilities as language teachers. The entire group seriously considered and wrestled with the issues of moral imperatives of having a global language and strived to seek practical strategies that could effectively address such ramifications. Those students who were teaching college writing at that time naturally arrived at the notion of translanguaging, recognizing the fact that multilingual students process input, gain understanding, form knowledge, and communicate thoughts and experiences utilizing their multilingual repertoire (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). These students led the discussion on what it means to incorporate a translanguaging approach into their own teaching contexts, be it L1 composition or conversational English. A graduate TA, who stated that she “had never stopped to think about the English language before this course,” reflected:

I want my students to feel welcome and accepted no matter what variety of English they use. Composition is hard for everyone and they will be learning the new dialect of academic writing together, so understanding and patience is key for everyone. I don’t want to perpetuate linguistic discrimination or the idea that one variety of English is superior in my classroom and this can be done by educating students about where English has come from and how it has evolved into world Englishes. (S4)

As the students above have demonstrated, these various outcomes closely align with Christian principles of acceptance and accommodation as students experienced substantial changes to the ways in which they engage with language learners.

## **2. Learning about the history of English restores multilingual students’ confidence in their L1.**

Currently English is considered an essential tool for academic and career advancement around the world, and the dominant position it now holds tends to place local languages on the sideline. Although the ultimate goal of the teacher training program is to provide a curriculum to equip future ELT professionals with practical knowledge and skills, it is equally important to alert would-be teachers to linguistic prejudice and to emphasize equipotentiality of all languages

as a means to serve unique needs of specific language communities.

The importance of taking an additive approach, as opposed to a subtractive one, to the teaching of the English language has been highlighted by both practitioners and critics in various circles of scholarly communities. In the case of non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs), this would be possible only when teachers themselves possess a positive outlook on their own native languages. Learning about colonial histories and an emergence of various local dialects offered multilingual students an opportunity to address their own prejudice against their own language. It also allowed the participants to recognize that languages which are commonly considered inferior and inadequate, such as creoles, are worth not only studying and but also codifying, which turned out to be a liberating and empowering experience for some students. Linguistic prejudices toward local dialects are often exhibited in the strongest form by speakers of the dialects themselves. For example, when I asked a student from Jamaica if she could pray in her mother tongue in the beginning of the class, she refused, saying that it would be blasphemous to do so; she stated that her creole is a broken language and therefore should not be used when talking to God. Considering that one of our goals as Christian educators is to empower English language learners to reach out to their own people, such a disparaging attitude toward their mother tongue, be it a language or a dialect, should be brought to the surface. The class provided an open forum for students to confront this type of linguicism. A student from French Guyana reflected,

Local dialects/creoles have traditionally been very stigmatized, with the speakers themselves referring to them as ‘broken’ English or French etc. The class has provided me with information where I can at least try to change these views wherever I can. People from former colonies often do not recognize the dialects that they speak as ‘real’ languages, and I think I would be able to help address some of these misconceptions. (S6)

A Russian student shared a similar sentiment as she stated that critically examining the global status of English led her to realize the importance of maintaining a “language of heritage and pass it on to the next generation to diminish the trend of language extinction” (S5).

Critical language teaching entails helping learners develop agency as well as gaining a broader vision of various contexts in which the English language serves various purposes. It should also actively resist unsound, oppressive language policies and make public implicit assumptions upon which some policies are established. As the Russian student pointed out, first language maintenance would be an important element in such a pedagogy. Learning about the



history served as a facilitative force which enabled students to come to a proper appraisal of the value of their first language.

### **3. Understanding the changing landscape of English provides NNESTs with a sense of ownership.**

With multilingualism, rather than monolingualism, being a new norm, and as those who speak English as a second or additional language far outnumber those who speak it as a native language, conversational contexts in an ELF setting often involve mostly nonnative speakers, and many English learners may never need to communicate with native English speakers (Jenkins, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2007). The class ruminated on the elusive notion of ‘standards’ and what attitudinal adjustments should be made when teaching and using English as a lingua franca. The class also discussed the importance of supporting local teachers (i.e., NNESTs who teach in their own countries) as well as utilizing the unique assets that the local teachers bring to ELT in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts as they meet the increasing demand for English teachers worldwide. Many NNESTs are somewhat aware of their less-than-ideal positions compared to native English speaking teachers (NESTs) in the job market (Reis, 2011). NNESTs’ sense of inadequacy can be heightened when students (in some cases, parents) indicate their preference for white, native English speaking teachers. These factors could easily undermine the confidence of NNESTs and lead even the most conscientious and best qualified NNESTs to become the severest critics of themselves (see Lee & Sze, 2015). Several scholars (e.g., Faez, 2011; Rudolph, Selvi, & Yazan, 2015) have criticized using categories such as NS and NNS stating that such a dichotomy fails to recognize the complexity involved in understanding learner/teacher identities. And yet it is an undeniable fact that native speaker supremacy is still subconsciously present among various stakeholders.

A Korean student, in particular, expressed having been empowered and liberated when she recognized that in the newer paradigms (e.g., ELF, EIL), NNESTs can serve as more realistic learner models as well as effective teachers, as she reported that the knowledge was truly life-changing:

I was shy. I was quiet. Furthermore, I was a non-native English speaker. These were all my weaknesses to be a good ESL or EFL teacher, I thought. But I was wrong... I realized that even all these things could be used for making me even a better teacher... it changed my life forever. (S7)

A Brazilian student also shared how she has gained a sense of ownership of English as an English teacher:

I have grown so much with the class. I appreciate that you included that class in our curriculum. I felt as a nonnative speaker and English teacher more in ownership of the English language because the English language is not frozen symbols used to communicate, but people that use it resignify in creative ways the English language expressions. Since the English language is spreading and various people use the English language everyone who makes use of it creates their own nuances and makes the English language their own medium of communication. Thus, as an English teacher I must be attuned that as English enables various ways of expressing, this diversity must be communicated to students. (S8)

The insights gained from historical perspectives freed these NNESTs from fear and feelings of inadequacy and allowed them to recognize their potential as effective English teachers, as well as learn to appreciate the creative power of the English language. To me, this is just as important and empowering, if not more, as learning methods and pedagogy.

There were also a couple of other comments shared by students, which I think are worth mentioning. A student who now teaches at a local academy said that knowledge of history helped her to be able to explain to her ESL students why not everything in the English language follows a set of rules. She said, “It is freeing to have an explanation for why my language is so wacky!” (S3). Another student commented that learning the history has motivated her to “develop a more critical approach to the choice of materials for language teaching aiming for a diversity-oriented approach rather over a single-culture oriented one” (S5).

## **Conclusion**

I have outlined three major outcomes of teaching the development and global spread of English, which my former students have voluntarily shared. Although these themes are currently presented in a single course in my institution, I believe that it would be even better if they were woven into an overall program outcome and covered in multiple courses. That may indeed be the case in some programs, and I would like to encourage instructors and directors of such programs to share their practices through publication so that others can benefit from their wisdom.

Reflecting on my experience as an English teacher and teacher trainer, I can say with confidence that empowering students through history has also empowered me as an instructor. As I see multilingual students learning to value their own L1s and themselves as ELT professionals, as well as empowering their own students through the knowledge gained in the

course, I feel invigorated, knowing that my vocation aligns with the Christian mission of empowerment. It has also helped me extend the meaning of the message, “The truth will set you free,” to what I do as a teacher, in a practical and personally meaningful way, as I witness students recognize their prejudices, overcome fear, and develop a genuine desire to become more accommodating.

The following excerpt from a Peruvian student, who now teaches at a U.S. college, describes how she is empowering her own ESL students to reach their potential with insights gained from the class:

Now as an ESL instructor and teaching Middle East students, the knowledge of the history of the English language has helped me to see their language learning in a holistic approach. Most of them share with me about their accents and how this hinders their communication with American people. I love to encourage them that the most important aspect of communication is to be able to be understood by the listeners and also other important aspects of communication... Once they hear that, they start thinking positively about themselves and feel confident to be able to communicate with American people. (S9)

It is on that note that I would like to conclude this article, hoping that it will prompt others to consider incorporating these themes into their curriculum.

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## Appendix

### Partial List of Course Topics and Materials

The following list is provided to serve as a resource for those who wish to institute this subject in their teacher training program and yet have no prior experience. I have used selected chapters from books to serve the needs of my students and incorporated other articles to supplement course themes.

Topics	Materials
Development of English (Old, Middle, and Early Modern English)	McCrum, R., MacNeil, R., & Cran, W. (2002). <i>The story of English</i> (3 <sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Penguin.
Models of Global Englishes	Jenkins, J. (2015). <i>Global Englishes: A resource book for students</i> (3 <sup>rd</sup> ed.). London: Routledge.
Nativized Varieties of English	Kirkpatrick, A. (2007). <i>World Englishes: Implications for international communication and English language teaching</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
English as a Lingua Franca	Kirkpatrick, A. (2007). Jenkins, J. (2015). Jenkins, J. (2000) <i>The phonology of English as an international language: New models, new norms, new goals</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Voices of Postcolonial Writers	Kirkpatrick, A. (2007). Achebe, C. (1965). English and the African writer. <i>Transition</i> , 18, 27–30. doi:10.2307/2934835 Ngũgĩ, W. T. (1986). <i>Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature</i> . Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
NNESTs	Kirkpatrick, A. (2007).
Critics and Skeptics	Bruthiaus, P. (2003). Squaring the circles: Issues in modeling English worldwide. <i>International Journal of Applied Linguistics</i> , 13, 159-178. doi:10.1111/1473-4192.00042 Crystal, D. (2003). <i>English as a global language</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Quirk, R. (1990). Language varieties and standard language. <i>English Today</i> , 21, 3-10. doi:10.1017/S0266078400004454

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